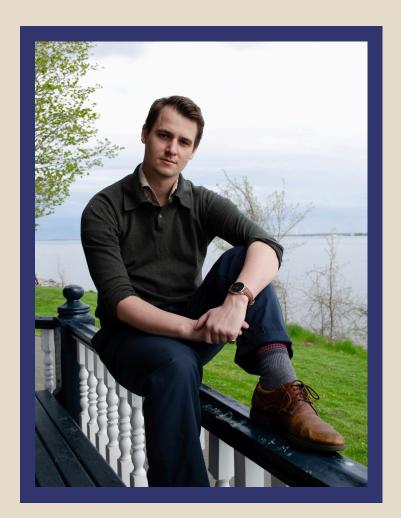# INTERVIEW WITH DAVID ELIOT

David Eliot, a graduate of the StFX Sociology program, has built a career at the intersection of technology, research, and advocacy. During his time at StFX, he was active in the local climate movement, an experience that shaped his commitment to community engagement and public knowledge. His studies also sparked his interest in AI, leading to his new book *Artificially Intelligent: The Very Human Story of AI (*releasing Oct 14, 2025). Beyond his academic work, David serves on the board of Dyslexia Canada, advocating for the rights of people with learning differences.

What drew you to study Sociology at StFX, and how did your time in the program shape the direction of your academic journey?

I actually began at StFX in the business program. At the time, I was running a small company and figured I'd focus on building that. But I took a Sociology elective and completely fell in love with it, it was the most interesting subject I had ever studied. It gave me new ways of thinking about the world and answering questions I always had. That one course led me to switch programs, and I've never looked back. The Sociology department truly changed the course of my life. If it weren't for the professors, I wouldn't be where I am now. Rod Bantjes, for example, taught me an incredible work ethic. I'm dyslexic, and while he was understanding, he never let me use it as an excuse. He pushed me to see what I was capable of. Around that time, I also discovered artificial intelligence. I received a grant to research AI and eventually wrote my honours thesis on the subject. It turns out the tool I was working on was GPT-2, so I was exploring AI several years before it became widely known. I'll never forget seeing the first lines of machine-generated text and realizing what it meant. That moment set me on a path that continues to shape my academic and professional journey.

Can you share a memorable course, experience, or professor from your time at StFX that had a lasting impact on you?

One course that stands out was Linda Harling-Stalker's class on Canadian hockey culture. She used hockey as a lens for teaching contemporary social theory, and it completely reframed how I thought about presenting ideas. Many of my friends, hockey players themselves, took the course, and they were engaging with topics like homophobia, climate change, and diversity and inclusion. That experience showed me that how you package ideas matters just as much as the ideas themselves. When you connect content to people's lived experiences, they listen. That lesson has stayed with me and later shaped my approach to public knowledge dissemination. It deeply influenced how I wrote my book, *Artificially Intelligent*. At first, I aimed it at academics, but I soon realized I wanted to reach a broader audience. I rewrote it for regular people, my friends, peers, and anyone curious about AI and society. That course was the beginning of that shift in perspective of knowledge isn't just for the academy, it's for everyone.

Can you tell us more about your involvement in the local climate movement during your time at StFX and how activism continues to influence your academic or entrepreneurial work?

I first stepped into activism through a class with Riley Olstead, who encouraged me to get involved in community organizing. I started small, helping with meetings and town halls, and eventually joined the Fridays for Future protests. One of the most memorable experiences was the International Day of Climate Action, we thought maybe a hundred people would come. Instead, more than a thousand showed up, and the jazz students even turned up with instruments, leading the crowd with music. That moment showed me how collective action can take on a life of its own. That spirit of advocacy has never left me. More recently, I've worked as a strategic advisor with Dyslexia Canada and contributed to a human rights case. Our efforts have pushed forward policy changes that affect children with dyslexia across the country. Working with them has truly ingrained that civic duty to be participatory in your community, in me.

What first sparked your interest in AI and surveillance studies, and how has that interest evolved over time?

It's funny because I went into Sociology to get away from computers. My whole family are programmers, and I wanted something different. But in my third year, I stumbled onto AI research and became hooked. My early findings connected with my interest in disinformation, and with the help of Rod Bantjes, I turned that into my honours thesis. The technology I was working on was GPT-2, which meant I was studying AI years before most people even knew it existed. That research led me to graduate work at Queen's University's Surveillance Studies Centre, and now at the Critical Surveillance Studies Lab at the University of Ottawa, where I've been able to study AI. Sociology at StFX prepared me incredibly well for that leap. Small class sizes, close mentorship, and rigorous method training meant I was already working at a graduate level before I arrived at Queen's. And it was during those years that I began writing *Artificially Intelligent*, trying to make sense of AI in a way that would be useful to the public.

Moving forward, what are you most looking forward to as your new book is released, and how do you hope to use your research to create meaningful social change?

What excites me most about *Artificially Intelligent* being released, is starting conversations with a broad audience. There's so much valuable research that never makes it outside of academia. With this book, I want to bridge that gap. My hope is that readers, whether they're students, workers, business leaders, or policymakers, can see AI not just as a technology, but as a mirror reflecting society's existing inequalities and challenges. If people can understand AI in the context of their own lives, they'll be better prepared to respond thoughtfully to the changes ahead. For me, the goal isn't just academic recognition but it's creating space for the public to grapple with questions about the role AI plays in our world. That's where real social change begins.

What advice would you give to current Sociology students, who may be unsure about their career path and how their degree might shape their future?

If you love Sociology, trust that it will open doors you can't see yet. The skills and perspectives you gain are useful in countless directions, business, research, advocacy, and more. Don't worry too much about having it all figured out. Take the challenging courses. Push yourself. Years later, you'll be surprised by how often those lessons resurface. At the same time, don't let stress about the future rob you of the joy of learning. You may never again have the privilege to sit in a classroom and explore ideas for their own sake. If you stay curious and passionate, the path will reveal itself.

David Eliot's new book, *Artificially Intelligent: The Very Human Story of AI,* will be published on October 14, 2025, by the University of Toronto Press.

Don't miss the chance to check it out!

ARTIFICIALLY INTELLIGENT
THE VERY HUMAN STORY OF AI
DAVID ELIOT

Interview by Isabelle Drohan